

King John's Castle

KING JOHN'S CASTLE is said to have been built on the orders of that monarch to keep watch over Thomond and the O'Briens. It may have been erected as early as 1185 and is similar in style to one built in Framlingham, Suffolk in 1190. The castle may have been completed by 1200, as a reference was made to its bawn in that year; it was mentioned in 1202; castle repairs were noted in 1207, 1212, 1216 and 1227; and the Bishop of Limerick complained about the fortress encroaching on church lands in 1216. Other repairs were recorded in 1272, 1326, 1417, 1423, and throughout the centuries. On 3 August 1988 Michael Noonan, Minister for Defence, outlined an international tourist development scheme for the entire area, including the castle.

THE CASTLE was built without a keep. The layout plan consisted of a powerful curtain wall with towers surrounding a roughly rectangular enclosure, an idea much favoured by the Anglo-Normans during the thirteenth century and used in other royal castles like those established in Dublin, Roscommon and Kilkenny. The bottom of the walls was curved to deflect missiles dropped from the battlements outwards; round towers jutted out from the walls to enable archers to catch enemies in a cross-fire and prevent them from undermining the walls; and the entire structure was encircled with a moat fed by the River Shannon. The inner bailey of the castle contained the great hall, kitchen, private rooms, chapel and stables, most of which were removed to make way for a military barracks at a later stage. In 1935 Limerick Corporation breached the walls and erected 22 houses in the castle courtyard. Areas outlined with brick, near the gatehouse, indicate where some of the barracks' buildings stood. By 1988 only one of ten such structures remained.

THE GATEHOUSE Faces north-north-west and is still protected by two flanking towers. A temporary iron grill is set into the centre of each tower's wooden floor, and a moveable glass skylight is situated in the middle of either roof, reminders of the castle's imperial military past when munitions had to be supplied to gun-crews on the roofs. Stone steps

leading up to the pointed doorway replace a drawbridge, but the slots in the stonework through which a portcullis descended can still be seen. A murder-hole, in this case a long narrow slit now covered by a large flagstone still protects the original entrance between the two d-shaped flanking towers.

THE NORTH-WESTERN TOWER, the one nearest to Thomond Bridge, is the oldest of the three remaining towers while the two d-shaped flankers are of a later period than the thirteenth century. The marks of Ginkel's bombardment of 1691 can still be seen on its facade, especially where brickwork was inserted to replace damaged stone. All of the towers had their roofs removed to accommodate artillery as methods of warfare changed, and the south-eastern tower was demolished and replaced with a new bastion which could accommodate "five or six pieces of ordnance" in 1611. The roofs of this and the north-eastern tower are slightly conical; their floor levels were raised when the area was converted into an armoury. In 1988 only the base floor of this north-eastern tower remained and it was kept closed to the public. The third tower to the south-west is also closed, but the walls by the river and the gatehouse are still intact although the battlements were demolished at the end of the eighteenth century.

KING JOHN'S CASTLE dominated Limerick for over 700 years. It was neglected under the rule of King John's son, Henry III, who succeeded to the throne at nine years of age in 1216, and ruled until 1272. In 1224 the king's goods in Limerick were scarcely worth eighteen pence, yet in 1226 it was the only castle in Ireland which was not fortified against the king. It was then defended by Richard de Burgh, its constable, one of an uninterrupted line of such incumbents who held that post, stretching from the appointment of Godfrey Roche, or de Rupe, in 1216 and finishing with the death of Viscount Gort in 1942. The Earl of Desmond's followers took the castle in 1332 but were unable to hold it against the Crown forces.

THE O'BRIENS AND MACNAMARAS captured the castle in 1369 but lost it soon afterwards. In 1417 Henry V (1413-1422) granted monies for repairs while his successor gave the charge of the castle to the Mayor and

citizens of Limerick on the condition that it should be kept in repair.

FR. WOULFE compiled a report, in 1574 on the city: "There is a castle in the said city built by John son of King Henry II and for many years it is disused, and the houses and roof of said castle in ruins, and a part of the wall is already down, but with little expense it can be repaired, and it is in a most beautiful place above the city which it can keep in check, although the people of that city have been always loyal to the Princes of England Artillery. Limerick has none save two very small pieces, and no other munitions of war save a few arquebuses, bows and cross-bows. I may truly affirm that in all the city there is not half a pipe of powder for the artillery".

THE CASTLE remained in a state of disrepair until the end of the sixteenth century. Its condition was noted in 1585 and it would have been unable to resist an attack in 1588 if any ships of the Spanish Armada had sailed into the pool of Limerick.

SIR GEORGE CAREW, Lord President of Munster, ordered its restoration in 1600. Sir Josias Bodley fulfilled his instructions over the succeeding years. The building was modified and its defences strengthened; two tower bases and the curtain wall were reinforced; a long storehouse was erected by the riverside wall; and a large bastion complete with sally port was built in 1611. A 1633 map of the castle shows the bastion; three round towers that "beare ordinance"; a drawbridge over the moat, or ditches; and fortifications on either end of Thomond Bridge.

LORD MUSKERRY forced the city to surrender to his Confederate Irish forces in 1642. Captain George Courtenay resisted and defended King John's Castle with 60 of his own men, 28 warders and 100 others until the Confederates bombarded his position from St. Mary's Cathedral, breached his walls with cannon and ignited mines.

GENERAL IRETON forced the Confederate garrison to surrender to the Cromwellian forces in 1651 when he bombarded the castle from the foot of Thomond Bridge and succeeded in breaching its walls.

PATRICK SARFIELD surrendered King John's Castle to the Williamites under Ginkel

in 1691.

THE CASTLE BARRACKS was built within the ruins of the castle in 1751 and was capable of accommodating 400 men. Over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the buildings were altered and renovated to cater for the military. The angle-towers were reduced in height and reinforced to bear heavy guns, while the flanking gate-towers lost their rectangular projections.

LIMERICK'S MOTTO describes its history very accurately: *Urbs Antiqua Fuit Studiisque Asperrima Belli*, an ancient city well-studied in the arts of war. The City arms are represented by a gate-tower complete with portcullis, flanked by two towers, an apt depiction of the entrance into the castle or the city.

THE TOURIST DEVELOPMENT PLAN for Limerick centres on the restoration of the castle. Work has since commenced on an integrated and innovative 13-acre heritage precinct project within the medieval quarter of the city, which should be ready for the tercentenary commemoration of the Siege of Limerick in 1991.

THE CASTLE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT will start with the demolition of 22 municipal houses erected in the courtyard in 1935, to make way for a medieval style tavern-restaurant and tourist-craft outlets. The Department of the Environment have approved the plan, and the families now resident there will be rehoused within the new King's Island medieval quarter if they so desire.

THE LIMERICK CIVIC TRUST was inaugurated at a public meeting on 17 February, 1983, Ireland's first Civic Trust, although others had long since been established throughout England, Scotland and Wales. The Trust exists to aid the social and economic regeneration of the Limerick communities and has identified the need for action in three ways: to strengthen community awareness through its programme of activities; to create a better understanding of the area through information, advice and education; and to assist the economic life of the area through the provi-

sion of work schemes, by the re-use of redundant historic buildings and derelict sites. The projected plans for the revitalisation of Limerick's inner city have been spearheaded by the Civic Trust, Shannon Development, Limerick Corporation, and the Government.

THE INNER CITY DEVELOPMENT PLAN designates the following areas for special attention; Arthur's Quay; the old City Gaol and John's Castle area; and Charlotte Quay and the John's Gate areas. In all, a total of 39 acres, of which the Corporation owns 20, are due for development, and it is hoped that the new Government incentive will inject new life into the city centre. Developers investing in these areas will enjoy a special status with rates relief, capital allowances, double rent allowances, and incentives for owner occupiers and owners of multiple dwellings.

THOMOND BRIDGE may have been erected as early as 1185 to lead from King John's Castle, in the Englishtown, to Thomondgate, on the Clare side of the Shannon. Like the castle, the bridge was reputedly built on the orders of King John and erected for £30. Other accounts state that the bridge was built in 1210, the real date hardly matters as this first structure collapsed about 1292, drowning 80 men.

WILLIAM DE PRENE became "Carpenter of the King's houses and castles in Ireland" in 1284 at the rate of 5p a day for his sustenance with an allowance of £2 a year for his robes. By 1290 he had been appointed "Keeper of the King's works in Ireland" — one of the highest administrative positions a skilled craftsman could reach during the late thirteenth century. He was arrested in 1292 and charged with stealing £3 worth of nails from Roscommon Castle and selling them in Dublin; taking £20 in wages due to others; embezzling £300 by falsifying the accounts of workmen he employed; and of causing the deaths of 80 men who drowned when Thomond Bridge collapsed. He was dismissed from the King's service and imprisoned until he could find pledges for £200.

THOMOND BRIDGE was rebuilt with four-

teen arches of unequal size which were turned on wicker-wick, the marks of which Samuel Lewis noted in 1837. In 1790 Charles Etienne Coquebert de Montbret, appointed French Consul to Dublin by Louis XVI in 1789, noted that this bridge of fourteen arches, all different, was astonishingly flat and solid. One of the disadvantages of using the bridge was that it was often covered by the waters of the River Shannon, and despite the fact that it was subsequently widened, the surface level was never raised. Gate-towers controlled access to both ends of the bridge until Limerick was no longer a walled city.

THE PRESENT THOMOND BRIDGE was designed by James and George Pain. Its foundation-stone was laid in 1836 although work on it did not commence until 1838. It is a plain strong structure, somewhat out of keeping with the rather ornate gothic-style toll-house designed and built for it on the city side, opposite the castle. The commemorative plaque states that work on the bridge was completed in 1840.

SHAWN-A-SCOOB, John of the Brooms, an industrious broom-maker from Cratloe Woods, used to sell his merchandise in the city markets. Tradition relates how the Limerick Burghers were unable to select a major and eventually decided to appoint to the office the first man to cross Thomond Bridge, on a certain morning.

To his surprise *Shawn-a-Scoob* was given the office. Some time elapsed before his worried wife came looking for him, only to discover him living in the lap of luxury and, apparently, unable to recognise her. "Shawn, Shawn", she cried, "Don't you know me?" "Get home out of that, woman", he replied, "sure I don't even know myself".

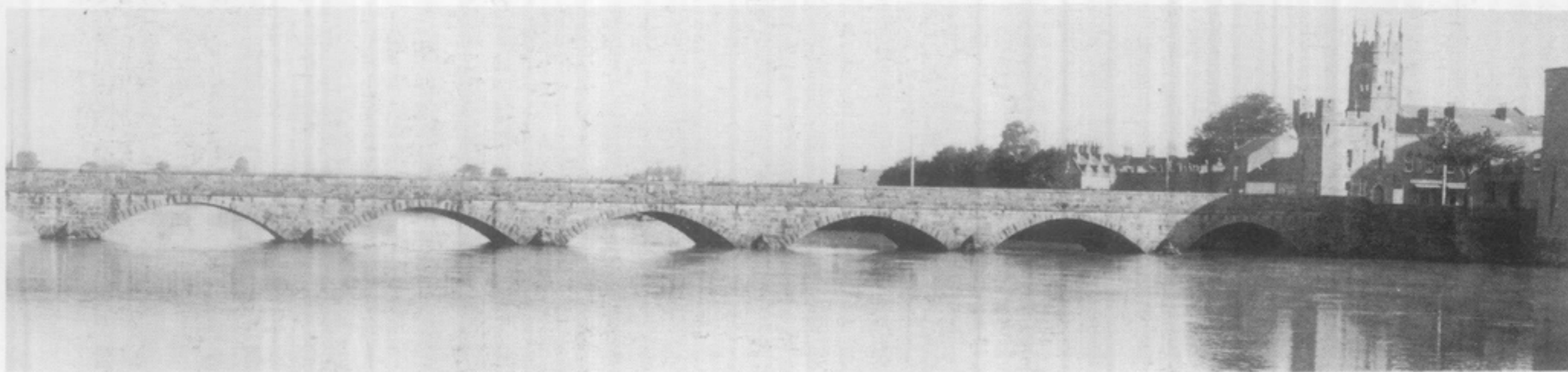
SOURCE REFERENCE NUMBERS

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Thomond Bridge, the Toll House and St Munchin's Church

